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ABSTRACT

The Milepost Testing Program of the Los Angeles Unified School District (California) is described. The district's Ten Schools Program was designed as an intervention to raise student achievement in 10 historically low-achieving inner-city schools, with a minimum 60-percent African American population. The Milepost Testing Program was conceived of as an inhouse system for monitoring student progress on instructional objectives for the 10 schools. Because program success was judged by achievement score gains, planners decided on a series of short multiple-choice criterion-referenced tests, rather than the yearly norm-referenced assessment. The machine-scored tests were aligned with curriculum and measured progress toward grade level. They were useful to central office administration, principals, and teachers. Although the program was designed as an intervention for African Americans, by the third year, enrollment was increasingly Hispanic American. Bilingual coordinators began to work on Spanish versions of the Milepost tests. Because there were many components of the Ten Schools Program, it is not realistic to attribute success to any one element. The testing program was influential in raising staff awareness of academic needs and the efficacy of their own instructional methods. By the fourth year of the program, achievement scores for the cohort entering as kindergartners had surpassed the expected fifth-year goal in math by 8 percentile points and were only 13 percentile points short of the fifth-year goal in reading (SLD)

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Measuring Opportunity to Learn in the Ten Schools Program[1]

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The Ten Schools Program

The Ten Schools Program of the Los Angeles Unified School District was designed as a research-based intervention to raise student achievement in 10 historically low achieving, inner city schools. The program was targeted to schools with a minimum 60% African American student population.

The Los Angeles School Board provided 9 million dollars to augment staff, materials, staff development and support services to these schools, in hopes of providing an environment in which every child could learn.

The chief outcome measure for the success of the program was to be students' scores on the district's annually-administered norm-referenced test. Program goals called for student scores to increase by a set increment each year of the program, and by the end of 5 years, school median scores were to be at the 50th percentile, the national average. All 10 schools started the program with grade level scores below the 25th percentile, with several schools averaging below the 10th percentile.

The Milepost Testing Program

The Milepost testing program was conceived as an inhouse system for monitoring student progress on critical instructional objectives for the Ten Schools. The curricular objectives were selected by a representative committee of Ten Schools teachers.

Because program success was judged by achievement score gains, program planners sought a method of taking "readings" of pupil progress throughout the instructional year. They decided on a series of short, multiple-choice, criterion-referenced tests that would assess student achievement on an incremental basis, rather than rely solely on the yearly assessment provided by the district's norm-referenced test.

The interval tests were also intended to give students repeated experiences with multiple-choice formats to dispel possible test anxiety and insure that final scores were a reflection of pupil progress, rather than difficulties with an unfamiliar format.

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The Milepost tests were aligned with grade level curriculum and measured studentprogress toward grade level objectives assessed on the norm-referenced test. Individual testswere constructed for reading, math, and language at each grade level with an average of fouritems assessing each objective. The combined tests averaged 60 items and were administered after every eight weeks of instruction.

The tests were machine scored centrally with a rapid turnaround--a full set of results were returned to schools within three school days of submitting answer sheets. Each school received a printout of student raw scores, item response analysis, frequency distributions, and an objective report.

Scores were aggregated by student, by classroom, and by grade level for each school. An administrative summary provided the same data for the combined schools.

Measuring Opportunity to Learn

While the Milepost testing program was originally designed to provide information to program personnel on student achievement, the regular feedback on pupil mastery of critical instructional objectives, disaggregated at the classroom level, provided an insight into classroom instructional practices.

Since the objectives assessed on the Milepost tests were aligned with the agreed-upon grade level subject matter taught in the 8-week intervals, the tests monitored, in effect, the degree to which students had been exposed to grade level objectives, and how well they had been taught.

As the tests were standardized across all 10 schools, the results revealed the relative success of each unit-- classroom, grade level, and school-- in teaching similar subject matter.

What Was the Impact of These measurements?

This disaggregation of data informed the instructional process at all levels: it provided a program overview to senior district administrators; it enabled site administrators to monitor the instructional effectiveness of grade level practices and of individual classroom teachers; and it enabled classroom teachers to determine which objectives were learned, which needed re-teaching, and how to group students for reteaching objectives.

The Impact of Reporting These Measures:
On Senior Administrators

The Milepost test results provided trend data to senior administrators monitoring the progress of the program schools toward their short- and long-term academic goals.

Through analysis of the Milepost results and students' subsequent performance on the norm-referenced tests, administrators were able to pinpoint schools, grade levels, and individual

This disclosure of results had two important effects. First, teachers became aware of their teaching success in relation to their peers at the same grade levels, both in their own schools and in other program schools. Second, teachers began to look to their peers for help in those areas where they were not experiencing success.

An unforseen but positive consequence of the testing program was its gradual ability to wean teachers from viewing testing as a threatening negative process, to allowing them to use it as a positive tool for informing instructional decisions. As teachers grew skilled in interpreting test results, the reports lost their aura of mumbo-jumbo and became a regular component of their instructional planning.

Although the Ten School Program was originally designed as an intervention for African American students, by the third year of the program student enrollment was increasingly Hispanic. With the changing demographics of the classroom, teachers who had come to depend upon the feedback provided by Milepost results demanded a Spanish version of the tests as well. Rather than wait for this project to be funded, Bilingual coordinators in the Ten Schools who had participated in drafting the original Milepost tests, took it upon themselves to produce a Spanish version of the tests.

In addition, as teachers became more confident in interpreting and analyzing the instructional implications of Milepost results, their use of the testing advisor changed. She was increasingly called upon to provide staff development in teaching strategies to address weaknesses revealed by the on-going assessments, and to conduct workshops in teaching test-taking skills for students.

On Student Achievement

Because of the many components of the Ten Schools Program, all directed toward promoting student achievement, it is not realistic to attribute program success to any one element. The Milepost testing program was influential, however, in raising staff awareness of the unmet academic needs of their students, and of the efficacy of their own instructional methods. It was also the vehicle that contributed, more than any other program component, to fostering peer coaching among teachers and administrators. This heightened focus ultimately had a positive affect on student achievement.

Although student scores did not improve by the neat annual increments anticipated by program planners, by the end of the fourth year of the program, achievement scores for the cohort group that entered the program as kindergartners had surpassed the projected fifth-year goal in math by 8 percentile points, and were only 13 percentile points short of the fifth-year goal in reading.

classrooms where students were not exposed to grade level subject matter, or where instructional delivery was ineffective.

It also allowed central office administrators to spot basic flaws in the system. They soon became aware that many teachers and even some administrators did not have the skills to interpret the test reports issued and, therefore, not able to make use of the information provided. When feedback of this type was received, the district provided prompt intervention. One such intervention was the assignment of a full time staff person from the testing unit to instruct teachers and staff, as needed, in interpreting test reports.

School and grade level performance on important instructional objectives on Milepost tests were compared to year-end performances on the norm-referenced test, resulting in findings about instructional practices that were not otherwise apparent.
One such finding was that skills or concepts believed to be "mastered" by students early in the school year were not generally reinforced by teachers throughout the remainder of the school year, with the resultant loss of those skills by the time they were assessed on the year-end test.

Principals, made aware of patterns such as these, were able to more effectively monitor adjustments in the instructional program. Principals who were unable to effect improvements in the instructional delivery at their schools were targeted by the district for intervention, and, in one case, for replacement.

On Principals

The Milepost testing program brought home to principals the impact of the testing-instructional linkage. Principals came to view test results as an indicator of the quality of classroom instruction, a factor within their control, rather than as a reflection of student aptitude. In the low-stakes context of this inhouse system, principals were able to identify instructional strengths and weaknesses of grade levels and individual teachers within their schools and to provide assistance accordingly.

As the sense of community grew both within and among the program schools, a sharing of successful strategies to attack common problems also grew. This occurred at the administrative and at the classroom levels. Principals of lower-achieving schools sought advice on instructional management procedures from principals of higher-achieving schools. Teachers who had experienced success in teaching specific concepts were encouraged to share their practices with those having less success. Peer coaching became common, breaking down the traditional isolation of the classroom teacher.

On Teachers

One of the strategies used by site administrators to demonstrate their support for the incremental testing program was to publicly post, in their schools, the Milepost scores for each classroom as well as the corresponding grade level scores of other program schools, after each test administration.